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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that explored problems in the development of two newly created metropolitan middle schools are presented in this paper. Based on a framework of organizational change, the main premise contends that as new organizations, schools are also inherently vulnerable to the generic problems that face all organizations undergoing change. Data were derived from interviews with teachers, administrators, parents, and community members. Despite the differences in the schools' organizational processes, they encountered similar difficulties in planning and in facing the "liabilities of newness." Problems included articulating and learning new roles, creating trust and an organizational culture, and overcoming environmental pressures. Suggestions are offered for improving the planning process, creating a nurturing environment for teachers, and managing environmental pressures. A conclusion is that the myth of Sisyphus--being doomed to an endless uphill challenge--does not apply to school reform. (Contains 27 references.) (LMI)

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PROFESSIONAL CULTURES AND REFORMING SCHOOLS:

DOES THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS APPLY?

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INTRODUCTION

Sisyphus is one of the best known minor figures in Greek mythology, remembered because his fate seems so applicable to modern times. Faced daily with the task of pushing a boulder up a mountain, only to have it roll down at the moment he reaches the top, Sisyphus is a symbol and touchstone for all committed professionals who believe that we labor long and hard at tasks that, at best, we can only partially or temporarily accomplish. We admire Sisyphus. He perseveres, his will undaunted by impossible circumstances. What educator cannot identify with that?

At the same time, though, we marvel that he keeps struggling up that mountain without analyzing why he cannot accomplish his task. If evidence repeatedly suggests that a job can't be done, isn't it better to reorganize the activity so that you can at least accomplish something of worth? This essential dilemma -- between commitment-perseverance on the one hand, and practicality-compromise on the other -- is played out repeatedly in the life of educational reformers who work in schools.

One theme in the current panoply of ideas for improving education rests on the belief that reform may be best stimulated by creating new schools based on new(ish) ideas. These proposals come in varied forms, including, for example, the program of "charter schools" recently passed in Minnesota and supported by the federal administration, and efforts in a number of urban school districts to develop new "schools of choice" that either start from scratch or are substantial overhauls of existing institutions, or the America 2000 proposal to create over 500 innovative new schools. A modification of this approach is found in efforts to fashion "schools within schools" that maintain a conventional school structure for many students, but recruit teachers to design alternative programs for students who elect or are assigned to them. Such efforts respond directly to the increasing belief that schools and professional educators who manage them are, like Sisyphus, are unable to carry out more effective ways of organizing their work primarily because they are constrained by the structure and culture of public schools. If you free teachers and students from existing bureaucratic chains, the argument goes, the American school will be born again.

New and radically redesigned schools have an important place in current efforts to genuinely change the pattern of American education. However, we believe that the underlying assumption of many proponents -- that the development of such schools constitutes a relatively straightforward solution to systemic school improvement -- is simplistic. In this paper, we do not intend to argue for or against the creation of new schools, but focus instead on an empirically based thesis: school reform through the initiation of new schools is no cure-all, but creates instead its own set of challenges.

In particular, many advocates for new schools seem to overlook the fact that starting a new organization entails high levels of strain for adults who work in them and, in the absence of attention to the development of human resources, these demands may obstruct the goals of reform. Our evidence suggests that such reform will be only partially successful if, idealistic visions notwithstanding, reformers spend all of their time thinking about curriculum and students, and do not pay attention to what happens to the teachers who work

there. Dedicated teachers will struggle with the task and the vision but, like Sisyphus, they often face an uphill battle with the possibility that, despite good intentions and back-breaking effort, their work may come to naught.

This paper will examine the cases of two new middle schools, both located in metropolitan areas with longstanding traditions of educational alternatives. Compared to many urban districts, the districts supporting these schools are relatively resource rich. However, despite positive environments for starting anew, the schools encountered similar problems during their planning phases and early implementation. Our goal in tracing their stresses is not to suggest that the educational strategies used at either were incorrect, but rather to point to common problems that newly created schools are likely to encounter as they design an environment that works for both children and the staff who work with them. The two schools are unique in their origins, their philosophies, their patterns of leadership and the relationship that they developed with parents, district staff and other actors in their environment. However, we have explored these experiences within a framework based on the generic developmental dilemmas of new organizations, and argue, based on research from other fields, that similar problems are likely to occur in most new schools.

In expanding on our thesis, we draw on interviews with teachers, administrators and relevant parents and community members, and documentary data gathered from the fall of 1989 to the winter of 1993. The following topics will be addressed: difficulties in planning and the generic "liabilities of newness" in organizational design which include problems of articulating and learning new roles, problems of creating trust and a new organizational culture, and environmental pressures. In the final section of the chapter, we present implications for practice and policy making support the development of new schools of choice.

STUDENT-FOCUSED SCHOOLS FOR EARLY ADOLESCENTS: DEWEY AND WHITEHEAD[1]

Dewey and Whitehead Middle Schools each speak to the commitment of teachers, parents, and a community to break the mold of traditional schooling. Located on opposite sides of the United States, they share a dedication to innovative education for early adolescents in an urban context.

Dewey is an innovative middle grades school (grades 5-7) marking a joint venture of a Northeastern urban school district, business partners, the community, and parents. Following a competition for creative educational programs, organizers slated the winning proposal for immediate implementation in the fall of 1989, and newly hired staff rushed to ready the program. In its first year, the school comprised three separate sites: one in the city's business district; one near an art museum and theater; and one on a college campus. Groups of students rotated among the sites, moving with one teacher who stayed with the

group the entire year. This structure changed after the first year so that students now have a home school base from which they move into the community.

The school exemplifies several innovations. An ongoing curricular focus for student activities is experiential education in an urban environment. Students, approximately 40 percent of whom are minorities, spend time at different "learning sites" during the year, working regularly on real world examples with outside mentors in several subject areas. Professional collaboration is a way of life at Dewey, with teachers working together on a routine basis. As one teacher put it, "The advantage of teaching in this school is working in teams and not by yourself." Site-based, participatory governance takes the form of an overseeing steering committee and several sub-committees representing business, the community and parents.

The second case, Whitehead Middle School, is located on the West coast. Opened in 1989, Whitehead is a city-wide middle grade magnet (grades 4-8) in a large metropolitan district with a 42 percent minority population and a reputation for "good education." Housed in a renovated building in the center city, the school has become a district showcase as an experiment in school restructuring. It has as its primary goal individualized learning in a supportive environment. Each student has an individualized learning plan (ILP) that is reviewed several times a year by the student, parents, and an advisor who remains with the student for five years. Affective outcomes are central to the school's vision.

Visitors to Whitehead are often astonished at the amount of technology available to students. An integrated learning system provides support for math and reading instruction; two computer labs serve as work-sites for word processing and project development; two classrooms are equipped with discourse systems that enable teachers to interact with students during class; and additional computers are available in several classrooms. But staff view technology as a means to an end. As the founding director of the school notes, Whitehead is "high tech, high-touch, and high-teach" with a student-centered focus that uses technology as one tool in the learning process, not as a substitute for teaching.

Like Dewey, parents choose to send their children to the school and agree to collaborate actively with staff. The student body also reflects the diversity of the larger community. A parental site council routinely discusses school matters, and three positions -- lead teachers, generalists, and student interns -- comprise Whitehead's differentiated staffing pattern.

PLANNING NEW SCHOOLS: WHO'S INVOLVED?

It is unfashionable in the educational change literature to focus on planning, which is assumed to be far less important in determining the success of a change effort than implementation (Berman, 1981). Furthermore, it is often argued that no matter what theorists wish organizations would do, carefully coordinated planning is both uncommon and often counterproductive (Louis & Miles, 1990). However, the issues that face new schools

are often embedded in their origins, and many new organizations encounter severe problems during early implementation because of designs which create impossible working conditions (Rosenblum & Louis, 1981).

We certainly are not the first to discover the early developmental problems that new schools face, nor are such problems unique to schools. The many factors affecting the course of planning and implementation listed by Fullan (1991) are indication enough of the complexity of the process. However, many have pointed out that it is during the earliest part of a new innovation's life that it is most fragile (Van de Ven, 1980). Firestone (1976) studied alternative schools started in the 60s and discovered that conflict and collapse often replaced a relatively short period of early enthusiasm. Perkins, Nieva & Lawler (1983), reviewing the literature on organizational "life cycles," found a surprising level of agreement on a stage-based theory among authors writing in very different theoretical traditions. The first two stages of each theory reviewed could be described as turbulent. First, there is a stage of naive optimism and commitment to a new idea, followed by conflict and challenge to authority. Only if the organization survives these two apparently inevitable phases does it move into a period of stabilization.

One such issue contributing to turbulence in the early phases of developing schools is the sheer number of actors or stakeholding groups who typically get involved. As March and Olsen (1976) note, decision processes in schools have a "garbage can" quality, in which players and issues cycle in and out, creating an uncertainty that may contribute to implementation problems.

Who should be involved in planning a new school? Following Bolman & Deal's (1991) human resources approach, those who will be most involved with the school -- teachers and administrators within the district -- should actively participate, a finding empirically verified by Van de Ven (1980) in a study of community based child-care centers. A counter view argues that this strategy would be likely to perpetuate the old and ignore the new, especially ideas from outside the circle of professional educators (Sarasen, 1982), or that it is simply unnecessary to involve everyone who will be affected (Crandall, Eiseman, & Louis, 1986). Data from the two schools in this study suggest that neither route is problem-free, but that the more typical exclusion of teachers who will actually work in the school creates serious problems.

Whitehead: The Value of Inside Expertise

After a well-known educator delivered a speech discussing forms of schooling to meet the educational needs of students in the next century, two longtime central office administrators took up the challenge. With the support of the superintendent, one went on special assignment, charged with designing, organizing, and locating resources for an innovative school that would be a working model of education for the future. In a year-long planning effort, this project director convened meetings of educational and technology experts, classroom teachers, union representatives, representatives of the local community,

and business leaders. Fund-raising was central, ensuring that when the school opened, the technology, media, and other innovative materials that formed a critical component of the new school's work would be in place.

Despite the year's planning, however, Whitehead's first year nearly overwhelmed the newly hired staff. The head instructional staff began work on July 1, two months before the widely publicized opening of the school, armed with only a conceptual framework and a commitment to certain principles and instructional approaches. The "details" of implementation were left to the staff and the students who joined them in September. Because the district was unable to quickly create new space downtown, as the school's vision demanded, the year began in a shared facility without all the needed resources; a mid-year move during the second year brought the school to its new facility in the heart of the city's business district.

Dewey: The Business Community Takes Charge

The planning process at Dewey differed dramatically from that of Whitehead, and created in effect what we might now call a charter school. Increasingly concerned that the existing system was incapable of providing quality education to local students, an influential business leader held a series of informal discussions in 1988 with business and community representatives and local educational leaders, including the president of the union. These discussions culminated in an open design competition to create a new public school for the city. Funded by this businessman, a formal request for proposals announced the competition, and the planning group ultimately received over 50 proposals. Five semi-finalists were paid $1000 each to elaborate their visions, and the winning proposal, together with features of the four other proposals, was deemed ready for immediate implementation.

Once the planning group completed the design of Dewey, district personnel hired the teachers and a principal who would bring the design to life. Although at least some on the committee wanted to delay opening the school until the fall of 1990, political pressures and the desire to act forced an immediate opening, only two months after the instructional staff was in place. As was the case at Whitehead, the exact workings out of the new school were left to the teachers and the students. But unlike Whitehead, where many high tech instructional resources were available early in the first year, the failure of promised resources to appear created a clear challenge to Dewey's staff during the first year.

Summary: Common Problems

At both Dewey and Whitehead, less than a year passed before the schools' doors opened to students. The planning processes occurred in charged political environments, supported in both cases by local school reform advocates -- policy entrepreneurs who serve as innovation gadflies to their respective public school systems. In the case of Dewey, an external group sponsored the design activities with only nominal support of the district superintendent and school board. Whitehead's superintendent, who saw an opportunity for

national attention, supported central office involvement in planning, and nurtured the board's support.

In both cases, however, the planning process failed to include teachers who would have the responsibility for making the new schools succeed. Not surprisingly, the first year at both schools passed in a whirlwind of activity as plans that, ultimately, were more conceptual than practical were put to the test. A Whitehead teacher noted,

> [The planning] was done with the very best of intentions, but absent from contact with the people who were actually involved in the program, both parents and staff. The people who became the school were not . . . the people who were having these discussions, so there was never really any committee [to work] between the vision that was imagined by those people and the vision that was imagined by the people who actually lived it.

As a Dewey teacher put it, "We need time to sort out roles, expectations, and communication. . . . Options are not always considered, and good decisions aren't made. The staff can't see the forest for the trees."

At Dewey the lack of internal district support provided little comfort or assistance for the struggling staff. As the creation of an outside group, the school largely faced indifference from other district personnel. Whitehead, viewed by many as a favored pet of the superintendent in an environment of declining resources, faced annoyance and anger within the district context. In neither case did the year long planning process -- in one case internal, in the other external -- provide detailed plans for translating vision to practice. The planners may have thought they pushed the stone up the mountain, but the teachers clearly found their load at the bottom.

THE "LIABILITIES OF NEWNESS:" TEACHERS AND THEIR NEEDS

New and restructuring schools often get positive press coverage and massive attention from educators. At least one we are familiar with dedicates nearly a third of a teacher's time to scheduling visitors who wish to have a quick view of the facility and its novel programs; another has allocated a special room to accommodate visitors. However, journalistic and once-over-lightly examinations of these schools have paid little attention to the costs associated with starting from scratch.

Quite a number of years ago, Stinchcomb (1965, p.148) identified the "liability of newness." We have known for a long time that new, for-profit organizations are extremely vulnerable; most fail within their first year of incorporation, and the "death rate" during subsequent years is still high. This is true for recently formed organizations that provide a well-understood service or product (e.g., fast-food restaurants), and even more true for entrepreneurs who hope to provide a novel service or product. New schools that are

founded because of a desire to offer a very different educational program, not, as in the 50s and 60s, simply because of increases in the student population, fall into the category of both new and novel. This presents them with a number of potentially difficult problems, including lack of precedent, problems of creating trust within the organization, and environmental pressures. At Dewey and Whitehead, each of these problems took on many dimensions.

Lack of Precedent for Teacher and Administrator Roles

Stinchcomb notes that people create new organizations because of the need for innovative products or procedures. Often, although not always, they involve new roles to be learned. In the case of restructured schools many of the roles are superficially similar in title, but the expectations of what people will do in the role of teacher, administrator, student, and parent may be quite different. Teachers in new or novel schools have no "old hands" to whom they can turn with a problem and no time-tested set of procedures to follow. Central office administrators and educational experts may have no better grasp of the details of new teacher roles. And not only are teachers' roles poorly defined, but, due to the pressing nature of the workday, they often have little time to discuss their work.

A second related problem Stinchcomb notes is that inventing and learning new roles is inherently inefficient and often fraught with conflict and difficulty: "Bottlenecks, which experience will smooth out, create situations that can only be solved with a perpetual psychology of crisis" (p. 149). These interrelated problems -- the need to learn because of lack of precedent, and the experience of inefficiency and conflict as a consequence of that need -- are amply exhibited in the cases of Dewey and Whitehead (see also Lieberman, Darling-Hammond & Zuckerman, 1991).

The press of schooling. The problems identified above are exacerbated in schools more than in other types of organizations because of the custodial functions that schools perform. Students are always present and must at all times be supervised under conditions that ensure safety and reasonably effective learning. During Dewey's and Whitehead's first year, the problem of time and keeping the students occupied with reasonable tasks was clearly the most difficult one facing teachers.

In retrospect, a design flaw in both schools was that they were organized to achieve radically different conditions of schooling for children, but their schedules made it virtually impossible for teachers to meet to develop the new model. Herein lies the applicability of the Sisyphus image: because of the demands of daily work in new schools, the teachers had no time to reflectively (re)consider the task that was given to them. Further thinking about the educational design of the school was impeded by the need to keep pushing the stone up the mountain.

Dewey teachers were located in two-person teams in three separate sites. Although teachers in each team could organize their time to "free up" a teacher for preparation or planning, they had no joint planning time during the school day. Because teachers were

committed to a participatory governance model that involved them in a variety of after-school committees, carving out time to reflect and develop the teams or the school as a group was simply not possible. During the second year, all the teachers were in the same physical plant, but still had no time during the school day when they were not responsible for supervising students. In the third year, a "prep period" was implemented, but teachers on the same team still did not have overlapping free time.

In Whitehead, the sense of crisis was apparent from the beginning. As one lead teacher put it, "When I first visited the building (two weeks before the school opened) and saw that it was completely empty except for a few tables and chairs, I thought, 'Oh, my God! How are we going to do it?'" During the first year, there were consistent reports that faculty were working 60 or more hours a week just to keep up with the need to develop instructional activities for the students. Like Dewey, the school had "traded" support staff for a low student-teacher ratio, which increased the demands on teachers to supervise students, and resulting in few opportunities for collaborative work.

The composition of the student body reinforced the press of the schedule. Middle-grades children are often viewed as requiring more consistent and constant adult supervision because they are neither as compliant as elementary children, nor as responsible as high school-age children. Both schools were "schools of choice," and one might reasonably expect that this would produce a more highly motivated student body than in a non-choice school (Moore & Davenport, 1991). However, because both were also advertised as offering an "alternative environment," many students who applied were viewed by their teachers or parents as intelligent, but unsuccessful in regular classrooms. In other words, many had minor behavior or learning problems. The need to reinforce the open, child-centered focus of the schools' philosophies while maintaining reasonable order in the schools increased teachers' stress. By the middle of the third year, the tension between order and student empowerment remained unresolved in both schools and had intensified frictions among the staff and between staff and parents.

The curriculum process. In both schools, teachers who were hired in the summer faced opening day with virtually no curriculum in hand. There were slogans about what the curriculum should look like and, at Whitehead, pieces of curriculum written during the planning year and some clear principles to guide curriculum development. But explicit content and actual lesson plans were missing, and, in any event, the educational philosophies of both schools demanded constant reconstruction of the curriculum.

At Dewey each teacher team had a mixed age class covering three grades. As a result, any effective curriculum that was developed could only be repeated in a three year cycle. Thus, each teacher knew that the first three years would involve a new curricular demand for each day. Because teachers were isolated at their three sites, opportunities for working on curriculum together were rare. The initial group of teachers was committed to the concept of experiential education, but had little or no experience in developing experiential curricula: The effort involved in learning and doing at the same time

overwhelmed them. By the end of the third year, only two faculty were left from the initial group of eight teachers.

Although Dewey could have turned to models of experiential education in pre-existing schools-without-walls, they did not do so until the second year because neither the teachers nor the principal was linked into the loosely organized group of school-based educators interested in this topic, and they were consumed with the immediate crises of lurching from day-to-day. By the end of the second year they agreed that constant development was not working, and the teaming policy changed so that students would move in groups among the three teams, which would repeat a curriculum module three times over the course of the year. While there is still a sense of pressure about developing a quality curriculum, the job is viewed as more manageable.

Whitehead teachers were strongly committed to the belief that the curriculum should be built around student interests and involve student construction of knowledge. Considered "unauthentic," textbooks were not permitted. During each quarter, teachers were obligated to offer new courses that were in part designed to meet student demands. Both the content and pedagogy of many courses changed several times during the year, although it was considered "o.k." to repeat a popular course, and some courses (e.g., writing, foreign languages) changed in focus but not necessarily in instructional strategy. Based on the elective principle, teachers needed to develop the curriculum to some extent before it was even known whether there would be sufficient student interest to sustain the course. For example, one novice language teacher worked with two colleagues to develop a module that integrated music, social studies and foreign language, but so few students signed up for it that it was not offered. In most cases during the first and second year, development occurred in "real time" -- syllabi, readings and course outlines were often not available until several weeks into the class, which caused considerable conflict with parents who were anxious to monitor what their children were learning.

During the middle of the third year of operations, the school's parent council reaffirmed its commitment to student-focused curriculum development by supporting a more complex schedule that encouraged shorter modules, more frequently changing offerings, and more individualized projects, thus increasing the demands on teachers for perpetual innovation. Within two months, teachers questioned the wisdom of keeping the shorter modules in the schedule, except for special afternoon offerings.

The teachers' role. As implied in the above discussion, teachers recruited to Dewey and Whitehead were committed to taking on new roles as well as alternative instructional strategies, and saw this as an essential part of educational reform. However, the will to push this particular boulder up the mountain was not necessarily matched with skill in keeping it moving.

Dewey teachers were expected to participate in a complex set of committee structures that involved them in governance and decision-making outside of the classroom. The design

for Dewey was based on the assumption of principal as guide rather than leader. Because there were initially no support staff, teachers were also expected to take on roles as counselors. As noted, curriculum development was a major part of the job as well. But there was no additional funding for staff development in any of these areas. Well into the third year we observed that group process and decision-making skills among the teachers were poor, resulting in a great deal of wasted time in staff meetings. Although staff had been added to provide support in the counseling roles (e.g., a community liaison and a special education teacher), confusion still remained about how to enact this aspect of the teachers' role. The curriculum crisis was structurally solved, but not until the summer after the third year was support provided to expand teachers' ability to work within the experiential education framework.

Whitehead teachers encountered a new form of role differentiation. The head teachers, in particular, were expected to take on responsibilities for staff development, hiring, and most administrative functions -- but they had no prior experience with these roles, nor were they provided with support from the principal or district. In most cases it seemed that head teachers avoided those aspect of leadership where they felt least able to perform.

All teachers had the same expanded counseling and curriculum development roles described previously. In addition, because of the school's emphasis on integrating technology into all aspects of instruction, teachers had to become able to integrate technology into their teaching strategy. Unlike Dewey, there was ample funding and additional time built into the yearly schedule for staff development. However, virtually resources were largely allocated to training in the mechanics of the technological component of the school, or to give teachers time for course development. By the third year, less experienced teachers still complained bitterly about the lack of support for learning how to teach in the new ways demanded by the schools, and many teachers were clearly uncomfortable with all but the simplest aspects of the school's technological resources. A set of interactive video disk players sat locked in a closet because no one knew how to use them.

Summary. The literature on school reform is filled with assertions about the need for collaborative work (Little, 1984; Louis, 1992a), reflection (Schön, 1987), and dialogue (Newmann, in press) if teaching is to become more professionalized and reform is to affect the quality of experiences in the classroom. Louis (1992b) has argued that schools must become "learning organizations" characterized by dense communication networks and systematic incorporation of new ideas into practice if real restructuring is to persist. Yet, when we look at the experiences of Dewey and Whitehead, we see a paradox. Radical restructuring that focuses on student experiences and does not directly attend to teachers' needs may generate conditions that inhibit collaboration, reflection, and dialogue, which reinforces the tendency to keep pushing the stone up the hill in order to meet the daily needs of students, irrespective of the painful sense of confusion and lack of progress. Unremitting pressures associated with "newness" and the need to develop the school in a seat-of-the-pants mode do not create a meaningful learning environment, even under conditions of extra resources. We hasten to add that although the liabilities of newness

associated with the lack of models and learning inefficiencies are inevitable, they need not be as severe as those experienced by Dewey and Whitehead. In our conclusion we will turn to some of the implications for policy and practice to mitigate these problems.

Lack of Trust and Problems of Creating Culture

Another problem noted by Stinchcomb is that new organizations are staffed by strangers. Although in modern societies we are used to dealing with strangers on a daily basis, every new organization may face problems in developing a culture of trust and cooperation. In addition, the lack of previous experience with others in the group often results in simple misunderstandings about who will typically do what with whom and when.

New schools are often staffed through the recruitment of an entirely new volunteer group of teachers and administrators who typically begin their work with no knowledge of one another and no history of trust. The same is true of the relationships between the school staff and parents. Because parents have no previous experience with the school, nor any place to turn to establish a sense of expectations about how it will work, they experience anxiety about how to interpret their child's experience as well.

Low staff stability. Instability among the staff occurred for different reasons at Dewey and Whitehead, but with similar consequences.

Dewey experienced high teacher turnover during the first two years of operation, largely due to teachers' belief that the effort required to sustain the school was simply too high. As the school began its third year, only the principal and two teachers remained from the group of eight professionals that had so enthusiastically opened the school. Although the school made every effort to explain the school's philosophy and expectations to those who applied for positions, during the third year one new teacher insisted on working to the union contract and was demonstrably uninterested in collaborative curriculum development, which created tension in nearly every faculty meeting.

Whitehead opened with three grades in 1989 and added a grade each year for the next two years. During the first year, the school was staffed solely by the four head teachers, four interns from a local college, and three "educational assistants." The head teachers developed a high level of value cohesiveness as they struggled to shape the school's philosophy but as additional teachers were added in subsequent years, they reportedly felt shut out of the process of influencing the school's development and unable to raise questions successfully about school structures and procedures. Due to dissatisfactions with their ability to contribute to the school's development, two left after the second year, and others indicated that they were planning to leave after the third. Although a consultant was brought in during the second year to work on improving the climate of trust, the lack of commitment demonstrated by the "generalists" reinforced the head teachers' belief that the fate of the school depended solely on them, while the staff conflicts reinforced district office views that "you can't run a school without a strong principal."

Although the sources of stress were different, in both cases, the constant introduction of new staff who had to adjust to a radically different school setting produced low cohesiveness at best and non-productive conflict at worst. Interviews with new teachers in each school reveal that they perceived trust to be a major issue: new teachers were asked to engage in innovative instruction, but they found it difficult to turn to more experienced teachers. For example, in Whitehead three teachers had been trained to provide in-class support in instruction to new teachers. However, new teachers did not ask for help, although they reportedly wanted it, because of their concerns about the way in which it would reflect on them. During Dewey's third year, the team that spent the most time working together comprised two new teachers, presumably because these were non-threatening relationships. New teachers did not seek help as often from more experienced teachers or the principal.

These problems were not due to bungling the recruitment process. Because of the unstable political climate surrounding both schools, teachers were not necessarily motivated to give up an unexciting but certain environment for one of great uncertainty. Both schools are located in districts that are generally well managed and reasonably supportive of teachers. Thus, a large pool of talented but highly dissatisfied staff does not exist. District personnel policies reinforce this problem. Should a teacher choose to leave Dewey or Whitehead, he or she would be put into a district pool for reassignment -- and possibly risk being worse off than previously. Thus, after the first year both schools tended to recruit untenured teachers (who had little choice) or teachers who were trying to escape their current assignment. This, of course, undermines the basis for value congruence.

The "community/parent relations" question. Parents did have to choose to send their children to Dewey or Whitehead, and there was, according to parents in both schools, a basis for value congruence with staff. However, parents were also concerned about the lack of structure and the absence of the more obvious characteristics of schooling in both settings. Because the schools were making up their programs as they went along, parents had to "take it on faith" that their children were receiving a high quality experience. With little formal curriculum, no textbooks to monitor, and unconventional assessment procedures, the parents who were most actively involved in their children's education frequently expressed concern -- and even alarm -- while trying to remain supportive.

Adding to parental anxiety was the fact that in neither school was it clear what would happen to their children if they completed their middle years at Dewey or Whitehead. Although Dewey's district had an "open high school" in one school-within-a-school, only the graduates of the open elementary school were automatically eligible for that program. At Whitehead, parents were concerned that the unstructured, student-centered curriculum and the absence of tests would not adequately prepare students for the district's traditional high schools, and activist parents banded together to lobby for an experimental high school as well.

Both schools attempted to keep in touch with parents through more frequent conferences than are typical in a middle school. In Whitehead, for example, parents attend conferences three times per year to help plan their child's individualized program. Nevertheless, complaints about lack of information were prevalent in both schools, and some parents withdrew their children because of their concerns about lack of communication and evidence of growth. Alarmingly, most of the Asian children who initially enrolled in Whitehead because of its technological emphasis withdrew after the first year. The increasing reputation of both schools as having disciplinary problems did little to increase the trust of middle-class parents.

Governance: What's the right balance? Both Dewey and Whitehead aspired to increase trust and cohesiveness by eliminating friction between administrators and teachers and by empowering teachers. In both schools, however, teacher concerns about leadership remained a significant issue.

Dewey exhibited a partial "leadership vacuum." The principal was hired after long discussion within the planning group about whether there should be a principal at all. When they finally agreed that it would be more practical to have one (under some pressure from the district), they selected an individual who strongly espoused a commitment to shared leadership. Dr. Booth believed that teachers should be responsible for the curricular and instructional aspects of the school, while her role was to coordinate, get resources, protect the school from district politics, and otherwise enable effective teaching to occur. Although she did not see herself as an "instructional leader," she espoused a key role as a behind-the-scenes facilitator. For example, she did not run staff meetings; the job rotated among all regular teachers.

However, the pressures on the school and problems with funding and implementation were so severe during the first two years of the school's life that she was frequently away from the school, attending meetings in the district office and putting out fires. Because the school was small, she was later assigned to be the principal of two other experimental schools as well, which also took her out of the building. Her absences made it difficult for her to work in her preferred, informal "talk is the work" style. Teachers in the school lacked leadership skills and direction and frequently wasted staff meeting time on trivial issues or failed to reach closure. While Dr. Booth was frustrated and wished that she had the resources for staff development in leadership skills, she did not want to deviate from her policy of managing a "teacher run school."

Whitehead, in contrast, rapidly became an oligarchy. The head teachers provided other staff with limited opportunities to participate in decisions. For example, when we asked if we could meet with the staff to introduce our research project to them, we were told that it was not necessary because head teachers made such decisions. Agendas for meetings were pre-set so that efforts by parents or staff to spontaneously introduce topics often could not be accommodated. It was widely believed that head teachers had "driven out" a generalist teacher who joined the staff in the second year because he disagreed with them on a number of issues. During the third year, a newly appointed half-time principal

experienced in assisting troubled schools was appointed to help deal with the increasingly problematic problems of trust at Whitehead.

Summary. Developing schools of choice and/or charter schools should increase the chances for developing trust among staff members and between staff and parents. If both teachers and students select a school rather than being assigned, all stakeholders have more control over the task of finding an environment that reinforces rather than conflicts with personal value systems. Value congruence should, in turn, increase teacher commitment and effort (Louis, 1991; Metz, Hemmings, & Tyree, 1988).

These results may occur in restructured schools that have reached the stage of stabilization. However, in both Dewey and Whitehead, a variety of factors associated with newness interfered with the development of trust and, therefore, contributed to conflict and dissatisfaction. In both cases initial hopes and enthusiasm about the development of a value-cohesive community focused on children's needs have faded, replaced by frustration, conflict, or a sense of rudderlessness. The absence of trust means that individuals may fall back on conventional procedures and goals -- old models and norms, not new. For example, in one "textbook free" Whitehead classroom, the teacher xeroxed math lessons and materials from a textbook and passed them out to students, while in Dewey the principal fretted that teachers using community sites less and less. Old norms dredged up to maintain individual teacher and parent confidence reinforce the problem of Sisyphus: they become an inevitable pressure ensuring that the rocks keep slipping back down the hill.

Environmental Pressures

Stinchcomb's final dilemma for new organizations revolves around the problem of maintaining effective relations with the relevant environment.[2] Existing organizations usually have stable (if not always productive) relationships with key external constituencies that provide resources, but, as Louis and Miles (1990) have pointed out, schools that attempt to do things differently often find that even overtly supportive districts and boards unwittingly place obstacles in their paths. Districts may promote alternative schools -- but they are then often surprised that the new schools behave differently from traditional models. New schools face a tough job in establishing a legitimate place within a traditional public school system, which itself suffers from environmental pressures to conform to popular views of how "real schools" operate from the larger public and the state. Three environmental pressures directly affected the development of Dewey and Whitehead: the districts' accountability needs; the competition for resources in a difficult fiscal environment; and the effects of public visibility.

Accountability -- but little support. The two districts in question both adopted a posture that the new schools were a three-year experiment, at which time administrators would decide whether or not to continue to support the school. As part of the experimental stance, each school was expected to participate in an evaluation.

Whitehead's planners envisioned the school as an demonstration based on a rational management process. Staff were expected to alter any activities that evidence found to be ineffective, and a local foundation provided funding to support three years of formative evaluation and a summative study at the end of that time. The district contracted with a professor at a local university, who implemented an intensive qualitative formative study of school activities. However, the tension between the school's need for process information and the central office's need for accountability to the school board placed the evaluators in an untenable position. On the one hand, unvarnished facts about the ongoing crises of a school in process were sought -- and there were many. On the other, administrators wanted descriptive information of the school's success. While some teachers viewed the evaluators as "mother confessor," others saw them as central office informants. Helpful information documenting tensions in student discipline, professional climate, and achievement results also had the potential to derail Whitehead centrally, rather than serving as grist for the school's development: to be candid was to potentially threaten the school's existence. During the second year, evaluation revealed teachers' frustrations, but the "solution" -- in-service work with a consultant to "build trust" -- failed to resolve the problem, and the superintendent was well aware that the school was troubled.

At Dewey, accountability took the form of a central office formative evaluation during the first years. The district evaluator worked with school staff to shape the research questions but, the staff, already consumed with trying to "redesign the car while we're driving 60 miles per hour," viewed evaluation as just one more thing to do. The most specific recommendation after year one was to improve physical education, something the teachers had already planned. When six of the eight teachers left at the end of the year the reconfigured staff simply couldn't spend time on a process they saw yielding little for the school.

In both districts, regular school funds supported radically different models of schooling, and the strings of accountability were unavoidably tied to that money. Central office administrators needed a signal evaluation that all was well (King & Pechman, 1984). But the goal of the evaluations and the assumption of a rational developmental process placed constraints on teachers who were busy with daily responsibilities for students. While new information might have been useful, time spent on the evaluation was time taken away from more pressing concerns related to individual students, schedules, and curriculum. The rational assumption that evaluation would somehow help the schools was swallowed up in the press of days and the lack of real follow-up and support for addressing issues revealed by evaluation

Policy and resource instability. As noted above, Stinchcomb reminds us that new organizations must maintain effective relationships with their external environment. For both schools, that external environment changed dramatically in three years, placing both, through virtually no fault of their own, in a potentially uncertain status.

Whitehead's history suggests that the political support and resources provided by the district superintendent were crucial to its development. That superintendent left the district in 1991, to be replaced by a highly respected, long-time district administrator who was well aware of Whitehead's reputation and, in a year of extreme financial crisis made his position clear: Whitehead was a school like any other in the district. He expected it to operate within district budget constraints and to succeed on the standardized measures the district uses to measure success. The project manager was given new central office assignments, and, when Whitehead's half-time principal retired, the superintendent's replacement was a trouble-shooter with a reputation for fixing schools in crisis. Members of the site council worried about what would happen if the school's test scores didn't improve, and the innovative longer school year was reduced to a regular 180 days beginning with 1991-93.

In its third year, Dewey faced even greater instability. The school's concept required instructional resources that business supporters never provided. District leadership was stable, but neither the superintendent nor the school board had ever been visible proponents of the school. Given its history of limited resources, staff turnover, and perceived disorganization, rumors of Dewey's closing at the end of three years became common-place in the fall of 1991. Despite a successful referendum dedicated to reduced class size, the district's overall fiscal situation is grim, with talk of a reduction of an additional major reductions next year.

The new schools created resource dilemmas for the district administrators. On the one hand, they clearly required additional dollars, equipment and space if they were to achieve their potential. But, on the other, a school is a school, and even Whittle Communications' new venture argues that all should operate with equal resources. Both schools' creators worked to insure that special moneys would be available to support the innovative activities during the first few years.

But, even if the fund-raising had succeeded, money is only one resource needed in new schools. Human resources in the form of necessary training (e.g., on group dynamics and team building) and routine release time for teachers to reflect on their work are important for sustaining change efforts in middle schools (Pechman, King, Schack, & Van Dyke, 1990).

Should new schools receive additional district support to help them establish themselves? The budget crises facing both districts in 1992 made it difficult for administrators to do this, particularly since in neither case do the superintendents see the school as their project, although they are not unsympathetic.

The effects of attention: A "lose-lose" situation. Early in their development, both Whitehead and Dewey became the darlings of the media, appearing in professional journals, in newspapers, and even on national television as models of innovation. Numerous groups invited teachers to present at local, regional, and national conferences. For the teachers, such professional opportunities were exciting, evidence of their changing role in education.

But in retrospect, the old saw "there's no such thing as good news" seems to have found additional support in what has taken place at these schools.

At both sites, presentations and media attention consumed the staff's time and energy. In the first two years, Dewey teachers, working hard to make sense of the school's operation themselves, were reluctant to receive visitors. Whitehead went so far as to hire a staff person to arrange and conduct tours and to handle public relations for the school. Funding for this position came from the school's staffing budget, increasing class size as a result.

Two examples from Whitehead suggest the powerfully negative potential of this attention. When a well-known politician chose to visit Whitehead for a televised photo opportunity, only selected students and teachers were allowed inside; the remaining were invited to hear the public speech, and many questioned why they were removed from their own school.

The second example relates to the reporting of standardized test scores. When Whitehead's scores fell following year one, the staff began to look seriously at reading and mathematics programs. But when someone leaked the results to the local newspaper, which sensationalized the negative outcomes, the district administration became sensitized to bad news. Hoping to de-emphasize the negative results of testing, the superintendent embargoed the second year's report until late in January of year three, only to be barraged by headlines when the scores suggested that students who stayed at Whitehead the longest suffered the biggest declines. School staff are now working to raise test scores -- an ironic activity for a school that purports to do things differently.

While it is no doubt exciting for a school to appear in the news media and may, at some level, raise national optimism about public school reform, for Dewey and Whitehead the long-term outcomes of such publicity have not been positive. By using resources that might otherwise have gone to the schools' development, media attention has drained needed energies and created a fish-bowl environment not conducive to growth. To the extent that the publicity is bad, this attention has truly created a lose-lose situation.

Summary. The environmental pressures on new schools point to the realities of their political contexts. The need to produce information for district accountability purposes put teachers in a difficult position, having to take time out from immediate demands to participate and wondering whether to withhold vital, but potentially damaging information. Political vagaries and the plight of district budgets can inescapably place these schools at risk, and the media attention that can create good press and public support for them may be costly when the news is bad. In addition, resources devoted to media management cannot be devoted to school functioning. Public visibility resulted in both cases in decreased support for the school among administrators and the community -- largely because the liabilities of newness became grist for school board and journalist's mills. In this case Sisyphus is again alone in pushing the boulder up the hill, with little or no support for

reflecting about the necessity of the boulder, the hill, the involvement of others in the task, or broader goals of the effort.

IMPLICATIONS

The stories of Dewey and Whitehead document the stress, conflict, and uncertainty that exist in new schools. New organizations are, we argue, inherently vulnerable, and are typically subject to the generic problems outlined above. We hasten to add, however, that the data presented above does not bear on the question of whether children in Dewey and Whitehead are receiving an effective and stimulating education. Although not reported here, we have observed classrooms in both schools and believe that both offer exciting experiences for students. These schools have not failed in an educational sense, but are encountering evolutionary stages that locate them squarely in the experience reported in other public and private sectors.

However, we also believe that at least some of the difficulties that Dewey and Whitehead encountered can be minimized. In particular, their maturation was impeded by the exclusive focus on the education of children. Of course children and learning are the primary justification for efforts to reform, but reform does not occur without the dedication of adults, nor does it occur in the absence of a supportive environment. The development of new approaches to curriculum and instruction must shape and be shaped by issues of design that consider all members of the school community.

Creating New Schools: Implications for Practice

Improving planning. Dewey and Whitehead were plagued by a common problem of rational managerial thinking: the assumption that planning and implementation are discrete and separable stages in the process of major change. As Louis & Miles (1990) have argued, reforms requires evolutionary planning, in which action and development are deliberately intertwined over a relatively long period of time. Some clear recommendations can be drawn using the evolutionary planning assumptions:

(1) Planning teams should not be distinct from implementation teams. The pattern of having a broad group of stakeholders and experts design a program and then turn it over to a team of administrators and teachers who are to carry it out adds unnecessarily to the pressures of creating a new organization. Political pressures aside, the planning process should include sufficient time for the school's actual teachers to translate visions into implementable plans.

(2) Policy entrepreneurs and idea champions can be helpful in gaining acceptance for plans and for raising support/funds. However, it should be remembered that policy entrepreneurs are not practitioners and their ideas need to be tempered with the wisdom of recent school- or classroom-based experience.

(3) Planning should include attention to the needs of teachers as well as to the needs of students. Realistically, the best way to ensure this happens is to have teachers who will be involved in the school involved in planning from the very beginning.

(4) Planning/implementation should occur over a minimum of a three year period. The focus on short-range planning teams that are distinct from the actors who must flesh out and act on the plan adds unnecessarily to the pressures of early implementation.

(5) Central office staff must manage the district environment to insure that the new school is neither ignored nor reviled. This may mean holding off on the public's demands for premature information about performance, while creating an internal environment that encourages use of "formative evaluation" data.

The need to create a nurturing environment for teachers. Ideas for new schools usually focus on student needs and/or educational philosophies -- or meeting political exigencies. As these cases demonstrate, more attention needs to be paid to the needs of adults in the school if reform is to proceed. Even in traditionally structured schools, teacher engagement has been shown to be associated with student engagement, which is, in turn, associated with achievement (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988). New schools may never be without crisis and conflict, but those that pay attention to teachers' needs may minimize some of the issues that led to high levels of turnover and dissatisfaction at Dewey and Whitehead. Program designers should consider structuring the school to enhance the "quality of work life" factors that have been shown to be important to teachers' work (Louis, 1991):

(1) A sense of respect from relevant adults both in and outside of the school. The principal and/or lead teachers tend to bear the greatest responsibility for setting a tone of respect;

(2) Influence over decisions that affect teachers' work. In new schools this would mean an appropriate balance between teacher empowerment and administrative leadership;

(3) Opportunities for collaborative work. In new schools this would mean a focus on creating time for joint curriculum development, reflection, and problem-solving;

(4) Opportunities to develop and use new skills. In new schools this would mean a serious consideration of what is being asked of teachers and the provision of systematic, developmental training to enhance those skills;

(5) Feedback on performance. This is particularly critical where teachers are being asked to enact teaching roles that are unfamiliar. In the absence of feedback and coaching, teachers will not be able to develop these new teaching skills very effectively, may feel burned out, and may leave;

(6) Adequate resources. In the case of new schools, the most critical resources are time and staff development money. Without these during the early implementation period, the most engaging environment may still result in burnout and turnover.

Will attending to these factors make a difference in new schools? Louis and Smith (1992) present case study data on new schools whose educational strategies were as unusual as in the two cases presented here, but whose early years were more stable because of the emphasis placed on quality of worklife by the initial design team and the administrator.

Overcoming the "liabilities of newness." If the above issues are attended to, it is reasonable to assume that some of the problems of trust and communication may be significantly reduced. However, in new schools that may not be enough because they confront additional tensions that add to the press of schooling. It is not enough to have release time for teachers to take them out of the classroom. We would go so far as to assert that unless the designers of new schools confront the problem of time very directly, the chances are that they will face the same problems documented here. Teachers must have time that is expressly allocated to the development of common agendas for the school and in which the development of professional culture and trusting personal relationships can occur. While administrators often argue that the time available within teacher contracts after school ought to be sufficient for this work, most teachers agree that their energies are at their lowest point when the children finally surge out the door.

Second, while organizers of new schools should insure that the period of school planning includes more explicit attention to curriculum than occurs in many cases, they should at the same time constrain themselves from immediately expecting a full-blown, completely innovative curriculum. During the period of initial organization, it is important to devote energy simultaneously to borrowing and adapting existing curriculum materials and to planning the development over time of the new curriculum. Underlying this recommendation is the assumption that this curriculum should be created, at least in part, by those who will deliver it, given that "real time" curriculum development is often ineffective.

Third, new schools should plan for the socialization of members. Teachers thrown together during the first implementation year usually develop a profound sense of camaraderie. But schools typically pay little attention as to how new recruits get to learn the culture and procedures of the school, and assume that once the locations of the bathrooms and the Xerox machine are pointed out, that informal transmission of norms and procedures will be adequate. This omission is less significant when schools operate within a traditional model and are expected to be rather similar to one another. Thus, it is not surprising that these new schools failed to consider that selecting and orienting new members is critical in the early stages of development. But many teachers who choose to work in a new school do so because of the opportunities to participate in forming a new school culture, and they may be dismayed if they find that the initial cohort of teachers has failed to consider how their ideas may contribute to the evolution of the school's mission and policies.

The "socialization problem" is particularly relevant for new schools whose formation is phased by adding a new grade each year.

Finally, new schools should actively engage in designing teachers' roles as well as being flexible and experimental in instruction and curriculum content. Just as there are few operating models for the pedagogy of the future, designs for teacher roles are also both incomplete and poorly formulated. If the experiments of today are to pay off in alternative paradigms for effective schooling, teachers should engage in action research and reflective dialogue about their own roles as well as those of students and educational processes (Kemmis & McTaggert, 1988). While teachers in both new and restructuring schools are typically rather articulate in delineating the problems that they face in carrying out their jobs, we find that they are less effective in thinking about models for relieving the pressures and problems. Training and support in organizational design and leadership skills over the early implementation years could prove helpful.

Creating New Schools: Implications for Policy

What do new schools need to "make it?" The policy implications of the experiences of Dewey and Whitehead speak to the importance of creating a supportive district environment for new schools, acknowledging that they are, in fact, different from existing schools. This special treatment is contained in the following recommendations:

(1) Openly and willingly provide start-up resources to new schools. To maintain that all schools deserve -- or receive -- equal treatment flies in the face of the case information presented. New schools minimally require funding to support their instructional mission, whether that be in the area of technology, performing arts, or urban education. Such funding must include support for training to use equipment or to implement novel curricula. But, in addition, new schools need resources to support individual teaching planning time, structured release time for collaborative planning and reflection, and special training to facilitate the school's development. This might, for example, mean staff development to foster interdisciplinary teaming or site-based governance. Without training, there is no reason to assume such innovations will succeed.

(2) Control access to new schools during their formative years (1-3). While the value of good publicity cannot be denied, the experiences of Dewey and Whitehead suggest that it comes at a cost. During development, teachers may decide the school is not yet ready for visitors and must be supported in their right to privacy. Once ready, faculty and administrators should decide when the public and the media are welcome to visit and limit access otherwise. This can be accomplished by consistently assigning one person (e.g., the principal or a lead teacher) to give interviews, by sponsoring public events regularly during the year, and by setting up one standard time for tours (e.g., Tuesday mornings) and using students (as they do at Whitehead) as tour guides.

(3) Exempt new schools from traditional accountability procedures during their formative years (1-3). While a rational model suggests the importance of evaluation from day one, such work must be structured to facilitate the work of teachers, not inhibit it. For this reason, we recommend that new schools engage in internal, in-house studies and that staff be assigned to this function. The results should feed into the ongoing cycle of reflection and planning to assist the process of organizational development in the new school. After three years minimally, benchmark data can be collected for use in a formal assessment at the end of five or six years, at which time the use of traditional accountability measures is appropriate. To demand test data prior to that time is more likely to measure where students began than to suggest the effect of the new school.

Are new schools the answer to the problem of school reform? We cannot answer that question definitively, but two points are worth making. First, we have demonstrated the problems that new schools encounter and have argued that these are generic not only to schools but to all new organizations. Second, new schools are founded for a reason: where there is an unfilled social need, either for more of the same (new schools are needed

because of population growth or increasing demands for education) or something different (dissatisfaction with existing schools), new organizations will eventually emerge.[3] However, without extensive support, it seems unlikely that explicit policies to create new schools will effectively re-create a systemic pressure for reform within the current public system. The fact that one of the schools (Whitehead) was initiated inside a district setting while the other (Dewey) emerged as a challenge from outside seems to have little bearing on their development during the first few years.

CONCLUSION

Does the myth of Sisyphus apply to school reform? Are educators, like Sisyphus, doomed to an endless up-hill challenge, to feel eternally unsuccessful at their tasks even when they are dedicated to reform? To our minds, the answer is no because, unlike Sisyphus, we can learn from our experiences, albeit that what we learn does not come in neat "how to do it" packages. In examining the cases of Dewey and Whitehead, this paper points to potential sticking points in the development of newly created schools and to their resolution. Planning, whether inside or outside a district, must ultimately involve those who will work in the school. The school day must include structured time for teachers to work together, to adapt or develop innovative curriculum, and to make collective sense of their evolving roles.

In addition, members of the school community -- teachers, administrators, parents, and students -- must consciously come together and work to develop trusting relationships. Finally, to the extent possible, the environmental pressures surrounding a new school must be managed to insure sufficient time for the school's development. Accountability must take internal forms, resources must be identified, and media attention controlled so that teachers may bring to life the vision to which they committed themselves.

These are not simple requirements and do not constitute a recipe for successful innovation. But, in the absence of these events, the creation of a new school may sadly reenact Sisyphus' daily struggle.

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Endnotes

1. Some characteristics of the schools have been changed in order to preserve confidentiality. None of the changes alter the conclusions or basic data presented in the body of the paper.

2. Stinchcomb assumed that the key external constituency is the customer or supplier, since in a private sector organization these groups control the flow of resources. In public education, however, resources are controlled by the school district and the school board.

3. This observation is relevant whether one operates under the assumptions of critical theory or functional theory. Functional theory argues that the needs of society determine the emergence of alternative forms of organization while critical theory argues that new forms arise because of contradictions and insupportable inadequacies in the older forms. Critical theorists assume considerable conflict over new organizational forms, an assumption supported by anecdotal evidence on Charter schools in Minnesota (Smetanka, 1992).